On 5 July 2013, the NHS will celebrate its 65th birthday. The NHS is the single largest employer of black and minority ethnic (BME) people in England and has been heavily dependent upon the services of professionals from all parts of the globe since its inception.

In the run up to this significant event, the NHS Employers organisation is profiling a number of leading BME individuals, all of whom are trailblazers – pioneers, leaders and experts in their respective fields of healthcare. Together, they have blazed a trail, inspiring future generations, and helped to shape and influence developments in clinical and management practice during the last 65 years. We hope you will join us in saluting the achievements of these exceptional individuals.

Professor Justus Akinsanya 1936-2005
Professor Akinsanya’s contribution to nursing education is nothing short of pioneering. From his beginnings as a black male nurse in a female-dominated profession, to his ground-breaking concept of bio-nursing and his prolific academic career, his considerable influence can still be felt in the healthcare field today.

The youngest child of Chief Susanah Adefowoke Akinsanya and Prince Isaac Akinsanya, Justus’s story starts at the age of 17 when he left his home in Nigeria. He had intended to travel to the UK to study economics. However, somewhere along the way, Justus made a fateful decision and instead registered as a student fever nurse at Abergale Sanatorium in north Wales. He later completed his nursing training in Crumpsall Hospital, Manchester, where the resident matron was supportive of male nurses, at a time when they were very much in the minority.

In 1960, Justus qualified in general nursing, specialising in tuberculosis cases. He was advised to become a nurse teacher and, after completing his A-levels, he went on to obtain a BSc Honours in Human Biology and later a PhD. He struggled to find work as a graduate tutor, but Peggy Nuttall, the campaigning director of the Nursing Times, stepped in and convinced him to write an article. ‘Tutors wanted: graduates need not apply’ was published and resulted in an offer to tutor at Kings College Hospital in London.

Justus returned to Nigeria in 1975, when he was recruited by the Nigerian Nursing Council. He became its acting registrar two years later. With a firm belief that the best knowledge is shared knowledge, his nurse training programmes for the Nigerian Ministry of Health took his skills out to communities in Nigeria and West Africa. Justus later returned to nursing education in the UK.
His bio-nursing concept was based on research from his doctorate and published as *Knowledge of the Life Sciences as a Basis for Practice* in 1984. Professor Akinsanya defined the concept himself as “the application of the knowledge of the life sciences to the theory and practice of nursing.” Nowadays, bio-nursing forms a part of nurse training programmes in countries as far afield as New Zealand.

In 1985, Justus became one of the early professors of nursing at the Dorset Institute of Higher Education, now Bournemouth University. He became the first black nurse to serve on the English National Board for Nursing, Midwifery and Health Visiting in 1988. A year later, Justus became a Dean for the Faculty of Health and Social Work at Anglia Polytechnic University. By 1992, he was reported to be “Britain’s best known black nurse” and “a seminal force in nurse education”. He underwent a kidney transplant in 1994 but didn’t retire from his position at the university until two years later.

During his retirement, Justus played an active part in charitable activities at St Helier Kidney Patient Association (SHAK), Disability Croydon, Nurse Fund for Nurses, the Nigerian Council of Elders and served as a governor to two schools.

Throughout his career, Justus attended conferences, taught and mentored all over the world, never letting illness bother him. However, in 2005, when he attended the International Council of Nurses conference in Taiwan, he contracted an infection and died in hospital in London in August of that year.

He is remembered by his peers as a motivated and endlessly cheerful family man with a penchant for bow ties. Throughout the world, his reputation as a human biologist, nurse educator and researcher is well-known through his writings in numerous journals and publications. Professor Akinsanya had been a Fellow of the Royal College of Nursing. After his death, as a tribute to his pioneering work, the college’s Research Society started the Akinsanya Award for Innovation in Doctoral Studies in Nursing. His family also started the Justus Akinsanya Fund for Education Advancement (JAFEA) to celebrate outstanding improvement, achievement in education, and professional development, and to commemorate a man who was a motivating force in their life.

“Justus Akinsanya (whom I knew well) was an extraordinary man. Full of energy, recognizing exciting opportunities and creating new ones, he achieved both academic and political ‘clout’. To continue his name through the annual Justus Akinsanya scholarship, managed through the Journal of Research in Nursing, is in keeping with a key aim of the journal – to promote excellence in patient care and to encourage research-based practice.”

Professor Veronica Bishop, Founding Editor – Journal of Research in Nursing